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Written statement* submitted by Al-khoei Foundation, a non-governmental organization in general consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[23 May 2014]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

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Eliminating All Forms of Discrimination and Violence Against Women

The Al-khoei Foundation is submitting this statement to appeal to the Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, its Causes and Consequences to continue her effective advocacy on a number of issues that contribute to violence against women and it's many causal factors.

The Al-khoei Foundation is an international charitable organisation, founded in 1989 by the late Shia Muslim spiritual leader Ayatollah Al-Khoei, which has had General Consultative Status at the Economic and Social Council since 1998. The Foundation works at local, national and international levels for the education and welfare of the Muslim community, and initiates many projects which promote the empowerment of women and youth. We have continued our work with women and young girls with the aim of enlightening and educating them through various seminars and workshops.

The Al-khoei Foundation recognises that today there are still far too many incidences of violence against women worldwide in both public and private spaces. From domestic violence and child abuse to violence in conflict and Female Genital Mutilation and many others, violence against women and girls sadly manifests in a number of different ways. Women who live in urban areas, particularly in developing countries, can be up to twice as likely as men to experience violence and data gathered by UN Women in 2013 estimates that around 35% of women globally have experienced either physical or sexual violence, although in some national studies that number can rise to as high as 70% in their lifetime.

The Al-khoei Foundation believes that it is important to address violence against women as it is not only a violation of a women's human right to protection from harm, safety and self-determination; it also limits the social and economic progress of families, communities and countries by reducing their participation in society. Women represent half of human society and if the females within society are incapacitated physically, mentally or economically they will be unable to fulfil their roles as mothers, wives, workers and citizens.

The underlying cause of much of this violence arises from discrimination against women and deep inequalities between women and men in society. To truly eliminate violence against women and girls these inequalities must be addressed and all discrimination towards women, which impedes their participation in decision-making processes at the home, local, national and international levels. It will require a holistic approach to women's rights, beyond the current dichotomy of civil and political rights on the one hand and economic and social on the other, recognising that women's physical security and freedom from violence are inextricably related to their economic, social and political integration into society as a whole, as the Special Rapporteur detailed in her 2009 report. The attention and support of government officials as well as non-state actors worldwide will remain essential if this wish is to be realised. Although the Millennium Development Goals do not specify that violence against women should be eradicated, the Third Goal, to Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women, contains many policies that address the underlying causes of such violence.

There are many reasons for the abuse of women, be it cultural or otherwise, which we cannot allow to be used as justification for violence and discrimination against women. However, we believe that more attention needs to be paid to research the role that sexual objectification of women in public television broadcasting, films, pornography, magazines, advertising and computer games plays in undermining the status and equality of women. In addition, the Al-khoei Foundation believes that there is a strong link between intoxicant-abuse and cases of domestic and non-domestic violence against women and other family members, and we would urge States to investigate the role of alcohol and drug addiction and provide support and rehabilitation for victims.

We firmly believe that our faith can provide us with the tools to deal with this devastating social problem, but also recognise that all too often religion is used as a pretext for undermining the capabilities of women and girls. We echo the sentiments of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Heiner Bielefeldt, who told the UN General Assembly in 2013 that "harmful practices inflicted on women or girls can never be justified in the name

of religion," and his condemnation that "[c]ountless women are exposed to complex forms of human rights violations based on both religion or belief and their sex."

The efforts of The Al-khoei Foundation, in collaboration with other organizations, has advocated to mark an important day in the Islamic calendar, the 1st of Safar, to be the day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women. The 1st of Safar is the day when the women and children from the Prophet Muhammad's household returned from the Levant to southern Iraq after the tragic Battle of Karbala when Imam Hussain(a) and the majority of the other men in the Prophet(s)'s family were martyred and women were taken as prisoners of war.

The Al-khoei Foundation is dedicated to promoting the welfare of the community, and we have undertaken a number of initiatives that relate to the protection and empowerment of women, girls and their fundamental rights.

Eradicating violence and discrimination against women and girls will undoubtedly include the elimination of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), a grave violation of the rights of girls and women and an act of gross violence that the Al-khoei Foundation has taken efforts to campaign against in the United Kingdom. FGM is most often practised on girls between infancy and the age of fifteen, but it includes procedures that intentionally alter and/or cause injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons with no health benefits and can bestow a health legacy which can significantly impede their health for the rest of their lives. We believe the practice reflects deep-rooted inequality between women and men, with UN Women estimating that 140 million girls and women worldwide have been subjected to the practice.

We would like to state unequivocally that FGM is not a religious requirement and should have no place in Islam. Causing harm and distress is not condoned by our faith, yet it is still sadly practiced in some communities who claim it to be under the remit of their culture or religion. The Al-khoei Foundation is engaging with efforts to eradicate FGM within the United Kingdom, working on an intrafaith and interfaith level, by becoming a signatory to an FGM Declaration for religious groups which condemns the practice of FGM and states firmly that FGM is not a religious or religiously-condoned practice.

In addition to engaging in FGM awareness-raising, the Foundation will also be supporting the ongoing campaign to eradicating gender-based violence and rape in conflict by participating in the Global Summit to End Sexual Violence in Conflict in London in June 2014.

The Al-khoei Foundation is working with community activists and religious leaders on issues relating to family violence, and abuse and violence against women. This work includes raising awareness about the religious guidelines and legal tools available to deal with violence and its impact, as well as placing a heavy emphasis on prevention schemes. The Foundation provides in-house religious advice and counselling for victims by activists and imams and where necessary refer victims to professional and social services. In addition, we have held workshops training community activists, imams and teachers to deal with cases of violence and awareness-raising seminars that have helped participants understand the complex factors such as culture, faith and family dynamics that contribute to and arise from this sensitive issue.

In tackling the underlying causes of violence against women, the Foundation has realised the paramount importance of involving men in the promotion of women's rights, according to the Islamic perspective. The male support team run by the Foundation is administered separately and trains men in understanding women's rights, the need for their participation in family and community decision-making and for the prevention of discrimination and violence against women, whether it be domestic or public. These men take it as their duty to pass on these values and this different perspective to other men in the community through lectures, one-on-one teaching programmes and seminars, making them agents of change in their community and hastening the overall speed of such change.

The Foundation also believes that empowering women and combating discrimination can be facilitated by the promotion of full education for girls and women. The Al-Zahra and Al-Sadiq schools in London, open to both boys and girls, the Al-Iman school in New York and the Al-Huda school in Montreal, Canada, focus on the growth, development and education of both genders emphasising personal morals and ethics. The Al-khoei Foundation also recognizes the

role of teachers in schools as professionals who may be able to recognize signs of abuse in girls and families and to educate them regarding the existence of violence against women and prevention. In addition, the Foundation strongly believes that women having self-confidence is key to women acknowledging their importance in society, and the Foundation regularly plans trips for young women to encourage them to engage in community participation and their own personal ambitions.

In addition to fostering awareness, self-confidence and equality-levelling structures with men and young girls, we also work to protect and cultivate new lives for widows and orphans in Iraq. Widows are some of the most vulnerable women in Iraqi society. The launch of the Al-Kawthar Project for Widows and Orphans in 2010 was a way for the Foundation to engage on an individual and community level with women in Iraq to help rehabilitate, support, educate and empower widows and young girls, leaving them more protected and less vulnerable to violence, poverty and insecurity than they would otherwise have experienced.

Although much has changed in past decades, there is still much to be done to eliminate violence against women. We call on the Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, its Causes and Consequences and for States to:

- Engage more deeply with faith communities on all issues related to violence against women and girls, discrimination, equality and empowerment.
- Continue her work to promote advocacy that dissembles inequalities between women and men in all societies and promote the empowerment of women and young girls.
- Contribute to raise awareness for the education and training of women, especially in relation to refugees, displaced and other vulnerable women such as widows in post-conflict areas of the world, and to promote the campaign to eradicate sexual violence in conflict.
- Continue to engage with men on issues of female equality, discrimination and empowerment as men will be crucial to progress and are an inherent part of any processes that tackle these issues.
- Push for the worldwide eradication of Female Genital Mutilation including the outlawing of FGM, prosecution of offenders and in finding ways to prevent girls being subjected to the practice when visiting their country of origin.
- Promote transnational mechanisms that would protect the full range of women's rights, eliminate violence against women and empower women and girls.